BEACON 23

VISITOR

HUGH HOWEY

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

The worst part about having it all, is having it all taken away.

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Beacon 23
PART FIVE: VISITOR
by Hugh Howey

• 1 •

I hated Sundays as a kid. From the moment I woke up, I could feel Monday looming, could feel another school week all piled up and ready to smother me. How was I supposed to enjoy a day of freedom while drowning in dread like that? It was impossible. A pit would form in my chest and gut—this indescribable emptiness that I knew should be filled with fun, but instead left me casting about for something to do.

Knowing I should be having fun was a huge part of the problem. Knowing that this was a rare day off, a welcome reprieve, and here I was miserable and fighting against it. Maybe this was why Fridays at school were better than Sundays *not* in school. I was happier doing what I hated, knowing a Saturday was coming, than I was on a perfectly free Sunday with a Monday right around the corner.

I call this the Relativistic Weekend Effect. We live in the present, but our happiness relies heavily on the future. Our mood is as much expectation as experience. Just like in the army, where life in the trenches worked the same way. It was the quiet that jangled the nerves. It was the lead-up before the push more than the push itself. To this day, I grow more faint at the scent of gun oil than I do at the sight of blood.

Maybe this is why it feels like a waking nightmare, living the galactic dream. I've got it all. I've got my own place,[1] a steady girlfriend,[2] a loving pet,[3] a decent-paying job,[4] a reliable car,[5] peace and privacy,[6] and the best view of the galactic core that doesn't require a lead vest.[7]

Yup, I'm truly living the dream.

So why do I feel like someone is about to pinch me?

•••

Merchants and pirates pass through my sector now and then and leave behind trade goods and news of the war. Everything's changing. The items I now barter for betray the fact that I'm in a relationship with the girl next door. I score flowers, a wedge of cheese, and two small blocks of chocolate from a gentleman I'll call a "merchant" if he'll promise not to laugh. I also learn from him of the first battle in sector eight, a small skirmish a couple light years along this arm of the Milky Way. I can imagine how it went down, having been in more than a few dogfights myself. A Ryph scout cruiser meets an exploratory force that has broken off from the main fleet. Shots are

fired. One of the small navy ships goes down. Just another casualty of a war that's taken billions on either side.

But then some cleric in the navy's offices back at Sol logs the coordinates and notifies the kid's parents of the last known location of their son's or daughter's atoms. And that cleric or that parent or some intrepid reporter notices that *technically*, the ship was just over some arbitrary line and that *technically*, the war has now moved into sector eight, and that *technically*, this means the galaxy proper is now well and truly fucked.

Talking heads blather across the holosphere. Young men and women gather outside recruiting centers, chests thrust out, to sign their noble death certificates. Thirty-two settled and semi-settled worlds across sector eight tremble. Sectors two and three start voting out doves and voting in hawks. Everyone on Earth wonders when sector one will get their turn. All the other sectors wonder the same goddamn thing.

Meanwhile, the Ryph advance. Meanwhile, war gets closer. There's no stopping it.

These are my pleasant and cheery thoughts as I drive chocolate and flowers over to the neighboring beacon for a date. It's Sunday out on the edge of sector eight. A day of rest. But I don't know how anyone can.

• 2 •

It's been so long since I've dated that I can't remember exactly how. But Claire is a patient teacher. She's already reminded me how to cry in the company of another, and that's a big thing to learn. As a boy growing up in Tennessee, you learned never to cry where anyone else could see. Crying was a sign of weakness. When we were kids, tears made the other boys around us brave.

In the army, it was different. You still went off and found a place to cry alone, but you weren't scared of your brothers and sisters in arms. In the army, tears made everyone else afraid. You didn't want to spread the weakness. Tears are contagious things.

I saw my father cry once and only once. It wasn't when I left for war, and it wasn't when Mom died. It wasn't when my brother got out of rehab and we both saw that look in his eyes and knew he'd never drink again. It wasn't when our sister married an officer from Cyphus and we knew we'd be lucky to see her every other holiday. Those were all times when I felt like I might explode, keeping my grief or relief all locked up. Those were times that sent me off to my room, alone, to weep into my palms.

But not my dad. No, the only day I saw him bawl was the day he pushed in the clutch on the old tractor, and the brake lines were dry, and the tractor lurched backward down the hill before he could get it in gear again, and there was just a muffled yip from our dog, who always followed too close to that tractor, and then she was gone.

I never asked Dad why it was that time. This was after Mom was gone, and Shelly was in Cyphus, and Tyrese was clean, and I'd already enlisted and finished boot camp. This was after all of that. But there he was, clutching his dog, who was already old and had lived the kind of long and leisurely life that any dog in the galaxy would dream of, whose coat had grown white and whose eyes had gone rheumy, and who hadn't suffered a bit—had just gone out doing the happy thing he loved best: following my dad around the property.

I watched my father cry for half an hour. This was two days before I deployed. I came to his side, and I stood there, feeling more shocked and confused than sad. I mean, I loved the dog, but I loved my dad more, and I didn't know what the hell to do to comfort him. The navy had just taught me how to pull a Star Swift out of a flat spin in atmo and get her back into orbit, but no one had taught me how to put my arm around my bawling father. No one.

I retreated to the porch and watched from there. After a while, I felt angry. He never cried for me like that, not once. Not for Mom. Not for Shelly. Not for Tyrese.

I think I've held on to that anger for too long. Never understood what my father was crying about. Not until Claire told me it was okay to let go, and when I did, I found myself crying for everything. And everyone. And even myself a little.

I wish I'd known what my dad was going through that day. I hated him for crying about the wrong things. But I get it now that he was crying for *everything*. He was crying for me. Crying because I was going off to war. Because the chances were better than even that he'd never see me again.

I guess those dry brake lines broke more than his pup's back that day. Whatever was still holding my father together snapped as well. I've felt that. It's something deep in the chest that goes. A rupture between the part of us that pulses and the part of us that breathes. To hold that together, you need an embrace from someone who cares. My father needed that embrace. He needed it that day, rather than the perfunctory and chickenshit one I gave him on my day of deployment. The day his pup died was the true day I went off to war. It was the day my father really needed me. And I sat on the porch and was angry at the world.

This is the story of my life, I suppose: always in the right place at the right time, and then I don't do anything. I stand there. Or I rock back and forth in my grandfather's chair. Or I go find a place along the trenches where it's nice and quiet, and I fill that place with hot tears.

So this is the thing I learned from Claire: Crying isn't simply about opening the floodgates to some private trauma and letting it out—crying is just as much about letting those around you know you're hurting. Our tears are trying to serve a purpose, but we rarely let them. I don't know how we got started with subverting that purpose—maybe it starts with bullies in middle school, or parents telling their kids not to cry 'cause it embarrasses them in public—I just know that it takes a bit of courage to unlearn that shame, and to be there for others when they try to unlearn that shame, and that it all gets easier after you feel how healthy it is.

Beacon 1529 fills my lifeboat's canopy while I muse on these things. I swing to the side and dock up to the magnetic collar that leads to the airlock. It's a ten out of ten on the pilot-o-meter. When I pop the hatch, Cricket goes bounding inside, looking for Claire, who shouts down from the life support module to come on up. NASA did not build these ladders with boyfriends holding flowers and chocolate and cheese in mind. I climb with my elbows and even employ my chin once or twice. Above me, Cricket's tail happily *thwump-thwumps* against the pumps and gensets and machinery that fill the cramped module.

“Honey, I’m home!” I call.

This is something I’ve heard people say in holocoms. Claire laughs every time. Almost like she can imagine the two of us sharing a home together. A normal life. Planetside. As soon as I get my head above the grating, Cricket turns and licks my face. If my warthen can read minds like I think she can, she has to know how much I hate this. And yet she does it anyway. Maybe she hates me. Maybe that’s why she does it.

“No,” I tell her, warding her off with lilies, appledots, butterflaps, and three other alien varietals not listed in the archives. Cricket turns in excited circles while I hand the flowers to Claire. One of the appledots is broken and leans over like it’s given up on life.

“For me?” Claire asks. She wipes the sweat from her brow and takes the flowers, sniffs them, tries to straighten the stricken appledot.

“Yeah, and I don’t think any are toxic,” I say.

She leans in to kiss me. Her lips taste of salt and grease. “They’re beautiful. And your beacon is officially under the worst quarantine in the history of quarantines. Why don’t you take these back to the lifeboat? The last thing I need is mites getting loose in here. Or roaches.”

“The trader said they were clean,” I protest.

Claire shoots me a look. I show her the chocolate and the cheese. The look persists. Like I said, I’m not very good at this whole dating thing.

“Should I put Cricket out the airlock as well?” I ask. “She might have fleas.”

Cricket growls at me. Claire scratches the alien behind the ears and gives me that look I used to see on my CO when he gave orders that he knew contradicted both reason and his last set of orders. “Whatever damage sweet Cricket has done has been done,” she says.

Cricket turns and cocks her head at this, like she can’t imagine ever doing an ounce of damage. I leave them both and put the flowers and the rest of the contraband back in the lifeboat. When I return, Claire is wiping her hands on a rag and putting her tools away. I give her another kiss before heading up to the galley to put dinner together.

Our days are a lot like this, all the little boring bits in the holocoms between the laugh tracks. There’s a lot of anticipation that something is going to happen, something really funny or tragic, but it rarely ever does. It rarely ever does, but you can still feel it coming.

• 3 •

"On or off?" Claire asks.

It's after dinner, and Claire and I are up by the gravity wave broadcaster, which is the business end of the nav beacon. I sit still and concentrate before I answer. How am I feeling? Stressed out? Depressed? Mellow? Content? I want to get it right. I'm trying to prove a point here. I've been trying to prove it for over a week.

I rest my head against the dome of the GWB, which has always relaxed me in the past. I'm supposed to guess if Claire has the power to the dome on or off (and yeah, we only do this when there's no traffic passing through). She keeps the results tallied, won't tell me how I've fared thus far, doesn't want me to have any feedback. Claire contends that I'm imagining the effects of the GWB on my brain, says she doesn't feel anything when she sits in the same spot. But I know I do.

"The power is … on," I say, giving her my answer. "I think. I'm pretty sure."

"How sure?" She makes a note on her tablet.

"It's … there are confounding variables."

"Like?"

"You," I tell her. And it's true. Just being around her, I can feel my pulse race less, my breathing grow deeper and more relaxed, my limbs feel free of the trembles and shakes.

Claire leans over and kisses my cheek. "I think that's enough for today," she says.

"So how'd I do?"

She laughs at me for asking. Like I should know better. Cricket burrows her head into my hand, reminding me that I've stopped scratching her. I resume. "I swear I can feel the difference," I say. "I can tell when it's on. It feels so soothing."

Claire puts the tablet away. She takes a deep breath, like she's contemplating something. Then she turns to me, her guise suddenly serious. "I believe you," she says. "I do. I'm starting to believe you. I'm just curious if it's really the GWB or something else."

"Like … you think it's all in my head?" I touch the rock I wear around my neck, which I thought for a while was an alien life form capable of communicating with me. I even named the guy Rocky. Ever since a cargo out of Orion bound for Vega splashed into a trillion pieces across my asteroid field, I've had a pretty loose grip on reality. Looser than normal, I guess I should say.

"I don't know." Claire bites her lower lip. "I guess I just know the spectrum the gwib works on, and they've been tested like hell to make

sure they don't have any biological effects, otherwise we wouldn't let you all come up here while they're running and even get *close* to them —"

"Maybe there's something wrong with *me*," I say.

Claire nods. "Maybe." Somehow she misses the very loud and obvious cast from my rod as I go fishing for a compliment, or for reassurances. Or hell—I'd be happy with a little bit of a pause before acknowledging that, indeed, there might be something wrong with my head.

And then it hits me like a frag grenade with its fuse delay set to max. I finally get that she's sharing with me the results of our tests, that she's admitting I've been getting them mostly right.

"So I've been scoring pretty good?" I ask. Otherwise, why would she be worried about me?

Claire bites her lip.

"How good? Have I gotten many wrong?"

Claire glances at her tablet. She's back to biting her lip. There's no way she'd worry something was wrong with me unless I'm nailing it better than chance would dictate. Something statistically significant. I reach for the tablet. "Can I see? Please. C'mon, Claire."

And she can see that it's important to me. Cricket licks my arm as I lean over and take the tablet from her. Claire lets it go. There's a spreadsheet on the screen. I scroll up, seeing all the check marks from our past dinner dates, and it takes a moment to see where the Xs would even go. Because there aren't any. I've been right every time.

I feel an immense sense of relief. I might be crazy, but I wasn't wrong. I've always known the GWB messes with my head, and I've always assumed it messes with everyone's head, but Claire really had me going there for a while. She really had me thinking it was just the act of sitting quietly and *thinking* it was working that was calming me.

"Maybe it's something you came into contact with in the trenches. A toxin, perhaps—"

I nod, thinking this is likely. Lord knows, I've sucked in enough alien atmo and bioblasts. No telling what's been in my lungs. I never got Nile teeth syndrome or the blue cough like a lot of soldiers, but perhaps I got something the docs missed.

"Or maybe it's neurological," Claire offers. She's puzzling through this the way she tunes beacons, getting them ready for service. Looking back at the tablet in my hand—which she uses to get these nav beacons sorted—I wonder how much of my appeal to her is that I'm broken. I wonder what she's doing here. Why she stayed. How NASA would've allowed a tuner to become an operator.

"Neurological how?" I ask.

"Well, it's just that … maybe it's more of an experienced trauma,

rather than a foreign body. You have all the signs of … you know—"

"Trench rot," I say. "Blast shock. War weariness. Soldier syndrome—"

"Post traumatic stress disorder," Claire says, opting for the clinical rather than the descriptive. Lots of dirty truths hide in those clean syllables.

"What would that have to do with this?"

Claire shrugs. "I probably know as much about how the gwibs work as the people who invented them, and nothing I know accounts for why you would feel anything from what they do."

"Should I be worried?" I feel like I should be worried. Claire is a whole lot smarter than me, and she looks worried. She places her hand on my arm, and I see a brave smile on her face, the one she keeps plastered over her concern for me.

"Everything's going to be fine," she says. "We'll figure this out, you and me. Everything's going to be perfectly fine."

But I know she's wrong. I heard it from the man who sold me the flowers and the chocolate and the cheese. I know something bad is coming. I know it's near. There are rumors of two fleets amassing on either side of this galactic arm, rumors of the navy collecting all its ships, and of the Ryph stockpiling all *their* ships, and no one knows whether these rumors are true, but we tend to spread and believe the worst of what we hear. It's so much easier to believe the worst.

I don't know what I believe. I've learned to doubt my mind. I need evidence. Facts. Like the sound from the proximity alarm, which begins to emit its soft blare, which in Claire's beacon sounds similar to the old air raid sirens the army uses. We have a visitor. And it's no great coincidence that bad things arrive while I'm thinking about them. No coincidence at all. Because I've been thinking about this for over a year now. I've known that this was coming for longer than I've worked here in sector eight. I've known it because there's no escaping it. War is always coming—it's only ever a matter of time. And right now, beyond our porthole, the time comes.

• 4 •

Almost as soon as the ships arrive, one of them is destroyed. It happens so fast, I assume at first that it's an impact death, that some ship not on our schedule tried to pass through here at twenty times the speed of light and met a disastrous end among the asteroids. There's even a twinge of guilt that maybe Claire's beacon was down for our little experiment—except that I'd sensed the beacon was on, and my beacon is also up and running, so it can't be that.

This and more spins through my mind in the handful of moments it takes for all the combustibles aboard the ship to glow and expand in an orange ball and then fall perfectly still.

What's left is a Ryph Reaper, one of the bigger enemy cruisers, its forward-swept arms studded with laser pods and missile hardpoints. The terror of the cosmos. The only ship that ever got the best of me. The shit of nightmares. *My* nightmares.

Cricket bolts from my lap. The warthen growls and swipes at the porthole with her claws. Claire's hand is digging into my arm. We are otherwise frozen, watching as the ship remains in view through the porthole. Remains in view because it's coming straight for us.

"Go, go," I say, trying not to yell, trying to remain calm. I only got a glimpse of the ship that went nova, but it looked like a Navy Talon. Must've been a pursuit through hyperspace for them to come out on top of each other like that. The war is here. It's really goddamn *here*. And we're sitting ducks. No—we're fish in a NASA-white barrel.

Claire launches herself down the chute toward the command module. I make Cricket go in front of me, watching her tail swish the weightlessness and her paws swipe at the walls until she reaches gravity on the other side. I'm right behind them.

"Lifeboat," Claire says, rushing for the ladder.

I run to the QT and send a quick message to NASA: *undr attck*. I leave out the vowels because we don't have time, not because of regs. Then I chase after Claire, wondering how either of our lifeboats is better than the beacon. We don't have a ship that can outrun a Reaper. I listen for the proximity alarm to signal more of our incoming fleet. Or their incoming fleet. The only thing that can save us is for the navy to get here. How are they not here?

We take the ladders as fast as we can. The temptation to run to a porthole and get a visual on the Reaper is overwhelming. Without being able to see where it is, there's a dread that our lives could end at any minute—a flash of plasma, and then our atoms are mingling in the void.

Another ladder. Claire's living quarters. The bed where we first

made love. A handful of my things. Some clothes I keep over here, neatly folded next to hers. A swirl and dent in the middle of the bed made by Cricket. All these signs of a comfortable, happy life flash by in my peripheral. Things I'll never see again. Things I'll never feel again. I'm back at the front. Back in the trenches. Thinking about home. Aching to go home.

I follow Cricket down the next ladder, taking in a slide what she spans in a leap. No weapon, no attack craft, no way of defending ourselves. But I'm forming a plan, one of those desperate plans, some way of making sure Claire and Cricket get out of here alive.

Before I take the next ladder, I grab the largest of the adjustable wrenches from the tool locker. I take the last ladder more slowly, one hand on the rungs, the other handling the heft of the tool. I jump down the last five rungs. Claire is in her beacon's lifeboat, yelling for me to get in. Cricket is standing in the airlock, looking at me over her shoulder, tail tucked between her legs, feeling our fear. All she knows is that her human companions are deathly afraid.

"In," I say, waving at Cricket.

She hesitates. She knows what I'm thinking.

I shove at Cricket's rump. "Let's go," I tell her. I imagine myself getting in the lifeboat as well. I try to believe it. So Cricket will believe it.

With me pushing and Claire tugging, we get Cricket through the airlock and into the lifeboat. I don't even think to lean in for a last kiss. Too much racing through my head. Too many days of standing in an airlock just like this and thinking similar fates but never with so noble a purpose. I key the lifeboat's outer door shut, then my airlock door, and then I disengage the ship from the lock collar. Wielding the adjustable wrench like a baseball bat, I take a mean swing at the control panel. There's a crunch, and the hiss, sparkle, and smell of an electrical short. I catch a glimpse of Claire staring at me through the porthole as the lifeboat begins to drift away.

Dropping the wrench, I run for my lifeboat. I know sound can't travel through a vacuum. I know this. I know my pet and my lover—my two best friends in the cosmos—are drifting away. But I swear I can hear Cricket's howling lament. I swear I can hear Claire asking me what in the hell I'm thinking. My warthen is an empath, so I can understand hearing her voice. As for Claire's, it wouldn't be the first time under duress that I started imagining things.

•••

At the helm of my lifeboat, I release from the beacon and pivot to

scan the area. Reaching overhead, I flip the radio on. “Claire, you there?”

“I’m here. What the fuck are you doing?”

Her voice is a blast of static and anger. I hear the soldier in her, not the nav beacon tuner. Hard to believe what we once were and what we are now.

“Listen closely,” I say. I’m watching the Reaper approach. It’s still heading for the beacon. I engage the thrust and race out toward it. “I want you to head toward the nearest big asteroid you can find. Grab hold of it with the pinchers and shut your boat down. Wait for the navy. Stay off the radio. Do you read?”

“What’re you doing?” Claire asks. And I realize that’s not static behind her voice. It’s Cricket. Hissing and growling.

“Go now,” I tell her. “Before any more of the Ryph get here. Please. Just go.”

Tears stream down my cheeks at the thought of anything happening to her or Cricket. The attack ship adjusts course toward the lifeboats. I don’t have the thrusters or control jets to outmaneuver it. I don’t have any weapon other than my desperation. I keep a steady hand on the control stick, ready to dodge incoming fire, but the enemy ship knows I’m no threat. It just races onward. I race to intercept. On my scanner, I can see that Claire has her boat going at full tilt as well. She’s heading toward the rocks. A good soldier. Can see there’s no stopping me, and that this isn’t going to be a holo where the hero and the girl profess their love while the bad guys wait patiently to make it a climactic finale. This isn’t going to be a holo where anyone has time to sit, frozen in place. This isn’t even going to be a holo with a hero. Just two people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I adjust course to make it look like I’m trying to slide by the Reaper and escape. It’s all about giving Claire time. An extra target. I know what the Ryph are here to do; I’ve been on these runs from the other side. They’ll take out one of the beacons and rig the other to blow. Or rig them both to blow. But they’ll hold at least one so they control this airspace. It’s the same tactic used in the old wars when bridges were both lusted after and stringed with blast charges. No way through this sector without a beacon. The Ryph must’ve cracked our GWB frequency, just like we cracked theirs. I’m thinking like a soldier, piloting like a flyboy, forming tactics like a man in love.

The Reaper races my way. No shots fired yet. Claire is halfway to the asteroid field. Moments before we pass, I throw my ship to the side, attempting to ram the Reaper. The Ryph pilot is fast; he flits to the side and out of the way, but I’m spinning sideways, rotating as I barrel forward, and I extend the sampling arm tucked under the nose

of the boat, reaching out, making my craft as long as possible, just want to touch, to make contact at full speed, to let this beast know that I pose a threat, for him to concentrate on me—

There's a clang as the sampling arm hits the Reaper's trailing wing. A racket. I slam against the side canopy, the crappy NASA restraints giving way, not meant for this. Stars flash in my vision. And then a hiss. An alarm as the cabin begins to lose pressure. Cold leaks in. A hull rupture. The constellations become a blur as the lifeboat spins in space, and I have one brief moment of lucidity left in which to wonder if I did more damage to my enemy than to myself. Just that angry hope before a bulkhead gives way in my lifeboat, and all that pressurized air rushes out, taking me with it.

As I cartwheel through the ruptured hull and out among the lonely and quiet stars, my lungs begin to burn. They say you can survive in the cold vacuum of space for nearly a minute if you hold your breath. Icy tears glaze my vision, and I wonder why anyone would even bother.

• 5 •

Every morning is an afterlife. Every evening, I die anew in the trenches amid nightmares of artillery finding their target. To wake each morning is a surprise. To rise a miracle. To breathe another breath some gift foisted upon me and beyond my control.

My eyes flutter open and settle on an old man standing before a lighthouse, a great wave crashing all around him. I know what that feels like. The man seems unaware of what's coming, but I think maybe he knows. I think maybe he's numb to it all. I don't think that's ignorance on his bearded and weathered face; I believe that's resignation.

A Ryph Lord moves before me and blocks the view of the picture. They say I'm one of the few who have ever been this close to a Lord and lived to tell the tale. Here I am again. Life appears to be full of coincidences like this, until you learn how it all pieces together.

"You're awake," someone says.

I recognize the voice. It's Rocky, the stone I wear around my neck. I try to lift my arms to touch the rock on its lanyard, this little piece of asteroid that I found among the debris of the wrecked cargo, but my arms are bound. I look down at my wrists, seized together and tied to my knees, which are bound together as well. I can't move.

The Ryph Lord hovers over me. My throat burns, maybe from dying out there among the stars. I try to focus my thoughts on Claire and Cricket, knowing I should remember something, a vision coalescing of them heading for safety, but I can't remember if they made it. All I care about in that moment is whether they're alive. I want my navy to come and rescue them. I lock down on this thought, trying to ignore the voices of my insanity. I try to see my love and my beloved animal safe and in some faraway place, some place where war will never reach—

"Yo, asshole, I'm talking to you."

"Shaddup, Rocky."

My voice is a rasp. I should be dead. I wish I were dead. I should've been dead a thousand times over. Unable to move, I feel my heart racing, despite my head being so close to the GWB. So it's not the sitting still that calms; it's the sitting still *voluntarily*. A soul can't be pinned and made to heal. It has to be talked into stillness and quietude. It has to want it.

"I'd say this is rather important," Rocky says. His voice seems to float up from my necklace, but I know it's all in my head. I hear voices in my dreams. Don't we all? Our brains can fool us. Mine makes a fool out of me.

The Ryph Lord shifts his great bulk from one leg to the other. The Ryph are bipedal, like all the sentient races we know, with skin like a shark's beneath their flight and combat suits. A face split by a vertical rift reveals rows of sharp teeth. Eyes lie to either side, and they bore into my skull. Two three-clawed hands are balled into fists. Muscles like steel. The biggest and baddest of the Ryph, Lords are never taken alive, rarely taken whole. I don't understand what this one is waiting for. Kill me, already. Or untie me so I can do it myself.

"Stop ignoring me," my pet rock says.

"Not now, Rocky."

"Yeah right, not now. Like I'm happy with any of this. I need this guy looking at us like I needed the hole you put in my head. And hey, what was up with that?"

"You aren't real."

"Let's table that. This guy has a favor he wants to ask. So open your ears and give a listen. Give a listen, and I'll shut up."

I stare at the Ryph Lord. My mind is clearing a little. It occurs to me that every moment delayed like this is good for Claire, Cricket, and the navy. Maybe my death can be put off for a moment or two. Maybe these last few minutes can serve some larger purpose.

"I'm listening," I say.

"Listen harder," Rocky tells me.

I wait. I can feel a thrum in the deck from distant machinery somewhere in the beacon. I can hear the whirring of a pump way down in the living modules. I can hear Rocky breathing, as if rocks can do such a thing. And then I hear the whisper, a hoarse voice launched across the cosmos like a dandelion seed on a breeze, a hiss beyond the vacuum, a single word below the senses, too dull to register, coming like an ache in my bones, like neutrinos dancing across the surface of my skull—

hello

It is fainter than my imaginary voices, and yet somehow more real. Able to be believed. I hear Rocky holding his breath. I feel the welcomed numbness of the GWB leach into my mood.

"Hello," I whisper back, the word held in my mouth, uttered inside my throat, not passing between my lips. A word of thought.

remember me

It's not a question but a command. A desperate plea. Like how the dead wish to be remembered. Like great-great-grandfathers would have others know their names. Not the war heroes with the medals, but the obscure, those who didn't fight. Those who died quietly with loved ones around and who were lowered into fathom-deep trenches rather than scraped out of kilometer-long ones.

The Ryph Lord moves, comes at me with his fist uncurled, those

fearsome claws sharp as razors, and reaches past my bound arms. The alien grabs my shirt and yanks it up to my neck, handling me roughly, but almost as if arms so powerful have no choice.

Alien skin touches my flesh, my gnarled and ropey scars, the Ryph's palm placed flat against my skin. I look down. The Lord's hand covers the three gouges that lead into my surgically repaired knots of flesh. It covers the gouges perfectly.

remember me

"I remember you," I say, the words trapped in my throat. I know that I am dead and that none of this is real, but nightmares aren't escaped so easily. Dreams are where men are free, not nightmares. I can escape no more easily than I can slip my bonds. I am back on Yata, beneath the grand Ryph hive, the last one of my squad alive, sitting in front of the bomb we'd carried across hellish klicks. But I don't set off the bomb. And then a Ryph Lord opens me up. It's the last thing I remember.

"I remember," I whisper. I little more than think the words. This is the same Ryph Lord. He came back to finish what he started.

look

I don't know what I'm supposed to be looking at. The Lord moves his open hand up and presses it against my face. I don't know how I'm supposed to see anything. Rocky gives me some advice:

"Close your eyes, asshole."

I smile. I feel drunk from the GWB. And Rocky still sounds angry at me for drilling a hole through his skull. I only did it to keep him close. Woulda lost him otherwise. Do we have to hurt the ones we love to keep them close?

When I shut my eyes, I see the Ryph Lord standing in front of me, just as he is, but with his hands to his side. And yet I can still feel his hand over my face. My mind relaxes. I am no longer fighting life. This is what we fight. Not death. We fight life. I let go of that, and I can hear Rocky smile.

Your war-mate, who came here on our behalf, she is gone.

Clearer now, I hear the Lord talking. And I see visions beyond him of Scarlett, my old love from the trenches, who came to my beacon and spoke nonsense, who died in my arms, whose lifeless body was carted off by a bounty hunter in all black who never uttered a word.

I think all of this, and by thinking it, I say it. I say Scarlett's name.

War is coming, the Lord says.

"I know," I say. "It's always coming. But you could stop. You don't have to come for us."

Both have to stop. Only we can stop this. Only you can stop this.

I think Scarlett's insanity has leaked into my thoughts. Her

nonsense is mixing in with the rest.

A great fleet moves to crush another great fleet. It will pass through here. You will not allow it.

I sense more than just the Ryph's words; I sense his thoughts. His vision. I see ships beyond number. They've been gathering on every moon and every planet, set off in staggered precision, all to meet at once, a million weak lasers concentrated on a single cancer, poised to slice it free.

I see secrets laid bare, secrets the enemy knows. A mass invasion that will fool no one. I see why no ship came to protect us—because it would tip off our enemy. I see why the Ryph want to destroy my beacon. I see why NASA sent a second beacon, because the invasion was too important. I see my being stationed here not to get rid of me but to deploy me. I don't know what to believe.

You and I are the same, the Ryph Lord thinks to me. *You and I and your war-mate and many others. Those who do not wish to fight. Who spare lives. Who hate war. The sad soldiers.*

"Who are you?" I ask. I no longer pretend to be talking. I'm thinking. I feel a deep connection like the one I have with Cricket, and more revelations hit me, more questions. Who is the empath? Maybe it's me.

There are those like me among my people who wish peace. Not enough to take charge. But poised to strike. We made plans with your war-mate. A sudden de-escalation of war. A sudden deceleration of warships.

Deceleration. Bring the war to a sudden stop. Even though I'm seeing the Ryph, I can still feel his palm against my face, the back of my head pressed against the GWB. Knowing I'm already dead fills me with calm. Claire and Cricket are okay. Claire and Cricket are out among the rocks, hiding.

Claire and Cricket are there in the GWB with me.

I can see them, because the Ryph Lord knows about them. They are behind me, bound and gagged, on the other side of the dome, with another Ryph Lord standing guard over them.

I know they are there.

I hear their thoughts, their trembling minds, their terror and fear.

None of us are safe.

I weep into the palm of my enemy.

• 6 •

"Let them go," I silently scream. I think-shout the words. I think-shout them again: "Let them go, you motherfucker!"

Only you can end this.

I open my eyes and twist my face left and right, trying to get free of the Ryph's hand. The claws are pulled away. I try to wiggle around and see if Claire is really there. I feel her like one might feel a presence in a dark room. My hallucinations are creeping into the world of sight and sound. The other Ryph comes into view. The two aliens stare at one another. They are thinking between them. I hear the hiss of a language unknown. I catch only shapes of meanings, the things they visualize. They are arguing. One is afraid. The other has an aura of hope. I feel Cricket there, in my mind. Is she the one we're speaking through? Conduits of conduits. The GWB and my warthen and my pet rock and something Claire opened in my too-tight chest.

"Let them go, and I'll do whatever you want," I say.

The words take shape in the air and across our minds. I feel how to muscle the thoughts into clear form. I realize their voices have been mere whispers in my mind, and that just the same, my words have been mere whispers in theirs. But I am shouting now. I can feel Cricket in my head, a growl of courage slicing through her fear. I give her comfort in return.

"Let them go."

One of the Lords moves out of my vision, but not out of my sight. I can see his mind behind me. I can feel the cosmos through the GWB. I can feel the other beacon and all the rocks and the calm at the core of empty space. The Lord returns, bringing Claire into my view. She is pulled, on her knees, her body sagging, her eyes down at the floor, a bruise on her cheek, jumpsuit ripped, the signs of the struggle she put up, my lovely soldier.

The Lord pulls the gag off Claire's mouth so she can speak.

Rage burns.

There is no keeping it out of their minds.

The aliens look to each other and to me, and I feel as though I should be able to rip my hands free of my bonds and launch into them and kill the indestructible. I am fury and fear and grief. I just want my arms around my love, my body to shield her, and those who wish her harm dead, dead, dead, dead.

peace

This word cannot penetrate.

Peace

I cannot hear it with the sight of Claire in pain.

Peace.

I will not have it.

Please—

And Claire lifts her gaze from the floor, and she sees me, and she smiles. There is a line of blood along the top of her teeth, and she smiles through the pain. “Hey,” she mouths. “I love you.”

I flood her with love in return, and I see her flinch from the shock of it all. So much at once. Feelings without form. Thoughts without word. What I feel from Cricket when she nuzzles her head against my arm. What I feel from Cricket when she licks my cheek before I can stop her. “No lick,” I’ve said over and over. As futile as it would be for Claire to tell me, “No love.” How do you stop loving? You can’t. And the war passes through me. The rage dissipates. It’s gone. The Lords seem to relax.

“Why haven’t they killed us?” Claire asks. Her voice is weak. Her hands are bound together in front of her, and I can see a fingernail that’s missing, blood in a trail down to her elbow, the fight she put up.

I answer as the thoughts flow between the Lords and through me.

“They want us to murder our own fleet,” I say, as startled as Claire to hear the words leave my lips, as we both hear them and process them at the same time. “We’ve been planning an invasion, and it’s passing through here, and they want me to wreck them across those rocks. They want me to turn off the lights in the GWB at twelve past the hour.”

Claire shifts from knee to knee, her ankles bound, until she reaches me. The Lords don’t stop her. She leans her head against my chest, sags there, trembles a moment before collecting her thoughts.

“Why don’t they just do it? What are they waiting for?”

“*I* have to do it,” I say. I think I understand what Scarlett wanted and what these Ryph want. Proof of the impossible. Of sheathed claws. To see if we have free will, are not just warring animals. I remember the paperbacks I read that were really written by my enemy. Scarlett said we were the invading aliens. And we are.

“Don’t let them use me,” Claire whispers. “We’re already dead. Don’t you dare let them use me to get you to do this. If they’re scared of our fleet, then let them get what’s fucking coming to them.”

I’m watching the Lords while Claire says this. They aren’t moving. They’re watching us. At least this is real, this conversation with Claire. The thoughts that come next feel just as real.

“They want a trade,” I say. “But you aren’t part of the bargain.”

“Fuck them,” Claire hisses.

I stare at the Lords. They’re talking to me. I’m talking back. I tell them I understand, but that I don’t believe them. That I won’t do it. That they’ll have to kill us both. That none of this makes sense.

remember

I remember the day I failed to kill the hive. The day I won my medal. The day my belly was opened and I bled on alien soil. The day the Ryph pulled back and no one knows why.

I remember holding Scarlett as she died in my arms. I remember feeling the life leave her body. She came to tell me all of this. She was the messenger. I can feel how much it cost these two Lords to make it here. What they've endured. Rebels on either side, factions who want to put an end to the cycle of violence, to the profits and votes that wars make. I feel a gap in understanding as great as that between my warthen and myself. Alien minds. Minds that know only to mistrust the different, to kill the other. Anything deemed *other*.

"They're serious," I tell Claire. "Our fleet will pass through here today. I can feel it. The war is coming, and they want me to stop it. They want *us* to stop it. It has to be by our hands, don't you see?"

Claire pulls herself upright to sit by me. She places her hands on top of mine. My hands are bound to my legs. I curl a finger around one of her fingers.

"They're using you," she says. "Don't let them."

I listen. I strain to hear everything. It's not me that's an empath, and it's not my warthen who's an empath. It's all of us. But there's a scab over that sense, like the shame of not crying in front of older boys. Something we protect. We dare not share, so we dare not hear. Claire was right: it was something that happened in the trenches. It was something that happened the day I refused to set off that bomb. I'd seen too many children like me die for nothing, and I could feel and hear all those unborn alien minds, not yet scabbed over, still able to listen to the cosmos the way the GWB listens to the cosmos, and they pleaded with me not to do it. They asked for peace. And I gave it to them.

The Ryph have something of this sense. Warthens, too. This great empathy. This rawness. This open wound.

"There are people on both sides who want this war to end," I tell Claire. "There are Ryph like me who are sick of the killing. Some of them are in high places. I think this guy, the larger one, is a prince or something like that. There are others. But so few of us. With no armies. Just unarmed civilians. Shameful pacifists. And even those in power who want to end the war, they don't trust the other side. There's no way to stand down. Nothing anyone will believe."

"What are you talking about?" Claire asks.

"A trade," I say. "An even swap. A gesture to those who don't want to fight anymore, from one side to the other."

"What do they want you to do?"

"I told you, they want me to destroy our fleet. And then they'll

destroy their own.”

• 7 •

Two hundred and twenty million lives—a settled planet's worth of young men and women—hurtling through space.

I can feel them.

I touch the button that will kill them.

Wires run to the dome behind me that brings me peace.

Hanging from my neck, a small rock trembles in fear.

"Are you sure about this?" Rocky asks.

He knows I'm not.

There's a clock on the wall ticking down the minutes. There's a picture of a lighthouse keeper there as well. He and I stand watch over rocks. We let ships pass without thinking what's in them.

Deep down, I know that I'll do nothing. I've been here before, with the power to annihilate. I keep these thoughts buried deep so the Ryph don't know. One of the Lords stands watch over me. The other has taken Claire to her beacon. There's another switch wired to her GWB, a finger hovering over it missing its nail. There's no way this happens. Claire's last words to me echo in my ears:

"You can't believe them."

Sitting there, contemplating treason upon treason, I nearly laugh out loud at how ridiculous it all seems. It's something I felt on the front before, when the kinetic rounds were coming down from orbital artillery and throwing up geysers of hot earth and shrapnel, and somehow you're wading through it all and handing death to those on the other side, and you just have to laugh. The orange blossoms of HE rounds, and the curving tracers like glowing and screaming bees, and the howling jets diving through atmo and dropping hell. The fact that you are alive is hilarious. The fact that the universe can come to this, that anyone finds it normal, is comically absurd.

I remember Scarlett, naïve Scarlett, the equally absurd. I remember the bounty on her life. I remember the risks she took to get to me and the impossible task she expected of me. I remember, vividly, that she knew things she shouldn't. She knew what had happened on Yata. She forced me to admit it, but she already knew.

Looking up at the Ryph, whose hand matches my scars, I think about the fact that he was there. He's the only other soul who knows what happened that day. This explains how Scarlett knew. It's because he knew Scarlett. They were working together. I see this in his thoughts, and he sees what I'm thinking. I see that this is a test.

"They don't know if we're capable of kindness," I tell Rocky. "We can't speak their language, can't think to each other like they do."

"You mean they don't talk crazy like you do," Rocky says. "You

know I'm not real. None of this is real."

"I think it is," I say.

I touch the button that will kill my beacon to reassure myself of what's real. This button is real. One press, and the greatest army of humans ever assembled disappears.

"This is what's wrong with me," I say. And Rocky listens. "It's why I feel the gwib. It's why I don't want to go on. It's too much."

"Listen to Claire," Rocky says. "Listen to her."

I shake my head. "No. This is right. She should listen to *me*. They want to see if we're worth saving or if we're too dangerous to have around. I want to see the same from them."

"And then what?" Rocky asks.

I rest my head against the dome. I can feel the cosmos breathe, can feel the black hole at the galaxy's core pulse. There is a rift between the two, between pulse and breath. A warring divide. I sense Claire over there, near the other GWB. Two antennas. I reach out to her, feel her anger and fear, the fact that I've betrayed her. I feel her bound arms, Cricket trembling by her side, the Ryph Lord who will push the button when I tell him to, if Claire won't. They just need to see what we're capable of. Will one be enough? Just me? I think of Claire's spreadsheet with all the checkmarks and no Xs. That's data. What will the Ryph conclude if only one of us goes through with it? And what if the Ryph sitting elsewhere don't go through with their end? Will I be killing my people or their people? Is there a difference? Is this what they want me to see, to feel? That there is no difference? That life is life. Is this the test?

Two hundred and twenty million lives. Even more on their side. Over half a billion souls. Tearing along through the cosmos at each other. They are already dead, all those young men and women. I tell myself this, and I tell it to Claire. Half a billion now or billions and billions more later. No end in sight. Don't generals and admirals make this call? Don't they kill our boys and girls every day? When I was sane, I bawled over the death of six human souls, the crew of a cargo bound for Vega. What am I thinking now? I go back and forth, like a man crazed then sane, like a finger punching in three digits of a lock code with confidence, then hovering over the fourth, a man who can only kill himself so far, who can't quite go all the way. I hear Scarlett yelling at me from the beyond to do this, to end this war, to be brave.

Just a few minutes to decide. All those boys and girls. The smell of gun oil. Anticipation. Dreaded Sundays. Fathers clutching their dead pups and old hearts and strong wives and crying for the first time in how long? How fucking long?

"I'm gonna do it, Rocky. For Scarlett."

"No—"

“For Hank.”

“Please—”

“If there’s a chance, just a chance—”

“And then what?”

It’s Claire speaking. It’s her thoughts. She’s crying too. She taught me how.

“Do you love me?” I ask.

There is quiet.

Tears.

Fear.

“…yes.”

“There are good people, Claire. There are enough good people on either side. You and me—”

She sees into my thoughts. I hear her laugh behind those tears. I feel the word:

politics—?

“Maybe,” I say. “Maybe. Something more than this. Something less cowardly.”

The ships are near. A wall of ships. Designed to break through and hit sector eight all at once, to overwhelm with the element of surprise, but everyone sees this coming. Just as everyone must see the coordinated response from the other side. Some of the people working with the rebels helped plan this, helped on both sides, helped line them up like sitting ducks.

I look to the Ryph Lord who nearly took my life. “I’m trusting you,” I tell him. “I’m trusting you.”

He makes a sign with his claws. I don’t know what it means, but I can read his thoughts. I am an empath, a dangerous thing. I didn’t ask to have my soul torn open, or my belly, or my goddamn life. I didn’t ask for any of this. But it was handed to me. And the only thing that ends a war like this is trust, release, love for those we hate, arms around those who would kill us, forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness.

“Do you love me, Claire?”

“I do.”

She is shaking with tears, listening to me, knowing the time is here, that it’ll be with her or without her. It’ll be her clawless hand or the Ryph’s. But she knows now, either way, what my hand will do.

Rocky is gone. Clarity takes his place. All my brothers and sisters, and why is this act so unthinkable when my orders on Yata were the exact same? Who gets to make that choice? Right now, I do.

The moment.

Here.

War, coming.

They’ll kill me for this.

When I deserve a medal.

I pull my head away from the GWB, want to feel what I feel, want my mind clear, want to allow those memories of war to creep in, creep back, torment me for a sliver of time longer, before I pull a trigger of horrible pacifism, a button of treason, those ships traveling too fast to stop, and the world is aglow, Claire crying for what we've done, the two of us, a million stars coming to life and full of death, and across the module the portholes facing out toward Yata glow as in the distance a similar wall of flame erupts, more stars appearing briefly and burning out, this violent, terrible, treasonous, glorious eruption of peace.

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Note from the Author

I know it is fiction to imagine, but what would happen if we stood on the rubble of attacks against us, whether literal or figurative, physical or emotional, personal or political, and we chose to forgive rather than escalate? What does that world look like? Maybe we'll never know. But I like to pretend.

• Epilogue •

The Ryph turbines and the navy jet engines scream in harmony. Steel cables hang taut from two craft built for dogfighting but now converted for commercial use. Swinging from the end of the cables, and hovering over the shore of the Chesapeake, is an old lighthouse. The stonework is intact, but the crown and foundation will take rebuilding.

I've spent countless hours staring at a picture of this lighthouse, a giant wave crashing up its spine, an old man standing there back when those rusted stumps were the stanchions for steel railings. I can almost see the ghost of the old man there, smiling at me.

When I got back to Earth from the Yata Peace Council, the first thing I did was track the old lighthouse down. I found her like a battered old soldier standing out in the waves, the foundation ready to go at any moment. Soon, she would have been lost for good. And so I decided to save her. I did the opposite of what those old wreckers used to do who demolished for profit. It took calling in some favors, but there's very little a planetary governor-elect and old war hero can't do.

The crew marrying the old lighthouse to its new foundation are a motley bunch. The foreman in charge of the project is Tryndian. There are two Hokos on his crew, three humans, and one of the pilots up there is a Ryph. A Ryph on Earth. Races that grew up warring among themselves and with each other now concentrate on the job at hand. And the job at claw, I suppose.

Reading my mind, Claire slips her hand into mine. Her other hand rests on her belly, which is full as the moon. Ten paces away, Cricket slinks into the tall grass, only her tail visible, stalking something only she can see.

Sometimes I feel overwhelmed with contentment. Sometimes I question what I did. Laughter and sobs still orbit too close to one another for comfort. But it won't be my challenge to forgive my actions. That's a test for the next generation. It shouldn't be easy; that's the whole point. I remember what I felt after the attack on Delphi. I remember the anger that caused me to enlist. The last thing in my mind was forgiveness. With the end of the war, someone tallied the total cost of all those little decisions, and it came to just over eighteen billion dead.

Half a billion of those are on me.

Claire pulls me close, places her hand on the back of my hand, holding my palm where the baby is kicking, is trying to distract my thoughts and redirect them to life. To renewal. The old lighthouse

settles onto its foundation, the work crew tight and organized. I can feel the lacework of scars beneath Claire's dress. She's been trying to convince me that the boy should have my name. I haven't liked the idea. I don't want him to turn out like me.

But maybe he won't. Maybe he'll do my name proud. And so I squeeze Claire's hand and I agree. I test it out, whispering my own name in Claire's ear, but the syllables are lost in a sudden breeze, and the soft sound is carried far out to sea, where it will swirl and mingle and be lost and present for all the rest of time.

notes

Notes

1

A junked-up nav beacon on the edge of sector eight.

2

She’s dreamy.

3

Okay, sometimes I think she wants to kill me. She's like a cross between a Labrador and a leopard. And I'm pretty sure she reads minds.

4

Honestly, I can’t tell why I’m even needed here.

5

If you can call a NASA lifeboat a “car.” It gets me to my girl’s place and back. Drives like shit.

6

In deep space, no one can hear you sob.

7

Look at all that nothingness. Can you feel it looking back?